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State Legislative Hunger Caucuses: A Platform for Cultivating Solutions

Introduction

Arkansas legislators formed the first state legislative hunger caucus in the country in 2007. The legislators had recently participated in the SNAP challenge, in which they temporarily lived on a food budget of \$3 a day (the average daily Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefit at the time) in order to shine a light on the hardships faced by food insecure families. Following the SNAP challenge, 20 legislators formed the Arkansas Legislative Hunger Caucus to continue raising the profile of hunger issues in the state. Today, more than four-fifths of the Arkansas legislature are members of the Arkansas Legislative Hunger Caucus, and three other states—Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas—have a bipartisan legislative caucus dedicated to hunger.

Establishing a legislative hunger caucus is one tool legislators can use to address food insecurity in their state and take action to help families in need. Hunger caucuses provide a platform for legislators to raise awareness about food insecurity at the legislature and strategize efforts to combat hunger. Some of these caucuses solely focus on hunger while others tackle food access and nutrition issues as well. Hunger caucuses engage in a diverse set of anti-hunger activities, from hosting educational events to sponsoring legislation and participating in community service projects.

Getting Started

Recruitment: A hunger caucus can bring together a diverse coalition of legislators, as no community is hunger-free. All of the existing hunger caucuses have a bipartisan membership. Typically, hunger caucuses also have a bipartisan leadership, with a Democrat and Republican serving as co-chairs of the caucus.

“Quite simply, food is medicine. For our children, for our seniors, and for the most vulnerable among us. Providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables is the single most important step we can take to nourish people, neighborhoods and entire communities.”

Representative Dwight Evans
(D-Penn.), co-chair of the Pennsylvania
Hunger Caucus

A hunger caucus can be launched with a small group of legislators and be expanded later. Some hunger caucuses circulate a legislature-wide email inviting legislators to join the hunger caucus as a strategy for recruiting members. The Arkansas Legislative Hunger Caucus places a hard copy invitation and membership form on legislators’ chamber desks at the start of the legislative session. Hunger caucus members and staff report that one key to recruiting legislators, who have busy schedules, is to outline a few simple and meaningful actions that members can take to engage in the caucus.

Establishing the Caucus: The procedure for establishing a Hunger Caucus depend on the rules for creating a legislative caucus in a state. Some hunger caucuses were able to form informally without needing official authorization. One hunger caucus reports seeking approval from their chamber’s leadership before creating the caucus. Some

states may require a formal process to establish a caucus. The Texas Farm-to-Table Caucus, the legislative caucus dedicated to hunger in Texas was required by state rules to register with the Texas Ethics Commission prior to launching.

Staffing Support: For the majority of hunger caucuses, the chairs' staff provides staff support to the caucus. Another approach is to enlist a community organization to assist with logistical needs, such as managing membership and event planning.

Activities

Legislative hunger caucuses take various actions to address hunger issues and help those in need. Below are examples of activities that hunger caucuses across the country have organized.

Legislation

The Arkansas Legislature passed SB352 in 2015, which appropriated \$1 million in grant funding to the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, a nonprofit that represents a network of anti-hunger organizations in the state, to support its efforts in feeding hungry Arkansans.

In 2013, Texas passed SB376, authored by Senator Eddie Lucio, secretary of the Texas-Farm-to-Table Caucus, which requires Texas schools with a high percentage of low-income students, in which 80 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced school lunch, to offer free breakfast to all students.

Community Service

The Tennessee Nutrition Caucus marked the start of the legislative session in 2015 by hosting the Campaign to End Hunger food packaging event in support of state food banks. Members of the

Tennessee General Assembly and officials from all branches of the government, including state Supreme Court Justices, participated in the event and packaged approximately 50,000 meals for Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee. The legislators packaged meals in the winter, a time of the year when food pantries stocks are lowest. The Nutrition Caucus partnered with Outreach INC., a national anti-hunger charity, to host the event at an auditorium near the Capitol.

Since 2010, the Pennsylvania Hunger Caucus has operated a vegetable garden at the state capitol to create awareness around hunger issues and provide food to low-income families. The Capitol Hunger Garden, which occupies 1,000 square feet of land adjacent to the capitol building, produces vegetables for food banks, pantries and local soup kitchens. In the course of

The Congressional House Hunger Caucus

In 2015, Congresswoman Lynn Jenkins (R-Kan) and Congressman Jim McGovern (D-Mass) re-launched the bipartisan House Hunger Caucus. The House Hunger Caucus brings attention to domestic and international food security issues, connects members with information and resources on hunger, and serves as a channel for non-profits and stakeholders in the anti-hunger community to communicate with Congress.

Since re-launching, 80 members have joined the House Hunger Caucus. Representative Jim McGovern stated "bringing Democrats and Republicans together to help families in need put food on the table is so important. I'm grateful to have strong partners like Congresswoman Jenkins and look forward to continuing the important work of the bipartisan House Hunger Caucus this year."

six growing seasons, approximately 3,700 pounds of vegetables have been donated from the Hunger Garden.

Fundraising

In Arkansas, members of the Legislative Hunger Caucus co-sponsor Serving up Solutions, an annual fundraising dinner at the Governor’s Mansion benefiting anti-hunger efforts in the state. In 2014, the Serving up Solutions dinner was a sold-out event, with more than 200 attendees and \$55,000 raised. At the event, guests were treated to a full-course meal served by Hunger Caucus members and the First Lady of Arkansas. Donors were able to contribute to Serving up Solutions through event sponsorship, individual table sponsorship, silent and live auctions as well as with individual contributions. Proceeds from the event went to the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance.

“ I launched the Nutrition Caucus to provide a framework to better understand food insecurity and its interrelationships with nutrition, health, education and employment.”
Senator Mark Norris (R-TN), Chair of the Tennessee Nutrition Caucus

The Pennsylvania Hunger Caucus hosts the annual Capitol All-Stars Softball Game to raise money for anti-hunger organizations during Hunger Action Month in September. Since 2013, legislators from both parties have played in the charity softball game, which benefits Feeding Pennsylvania and Hunger-Free Pennsylvania. In 2014, the event raised \$66,369 and 72 legislators registered to play in the game. Proceeds were raised through event sponsorships, ticket sales, raffles, souvenirs and vending. The Capitol All-Stars game was held in Metro Bank Park in downtown Harrisburg.

Tips from Hunger Caucus Members and Staff

- Focus on topics and plan efforts that foster bipartisan support
- Make it simple for legislators to participate in the caucus
- Enlist a local anti-hunger organization to provide staffing support
- Be the leader to take the first step to launch a hunger caucus

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